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SUBJECT: IRAN: THE GLOVES COME OFF IN AHMADINEJAD-MOUSAVI DEBATE

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: The much-anticipated live debate between President Ahmadinejad and his chief rival, former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, was a watershed event in which Ahmadinejad broke long-standing taboos by leveling allegations of corruption at senior regime officials and attacking the academic credentials of Mousavi's wife. Ahmadinejad's attempt to portray himself as a victim beset by an alliance of powerful establishment figures was met with derision by his opponent, who portrayed the incumbent as a radical who has endangered Iran through his delusional foreign policy and erratic management of the economy. The unusually adversarial nature of the exchange will likely further polarize the June 12 election, which Ahmadinejad already characterized as "three against one." The series of televised debates continues this evening as Mousavi faces Mohsen Rezai, a co-founder of the Revolutionary Guards and a long-time Ahmadinejad critic.

12. (C) Mousavi and Ahmadinejad squared off last night on prime time television in the second live debate of the campaign season. The confrontational nature and directness of the candidates' criticism of each other was unprecedented in contemporary Iranian political discourse. Ahmadinejad went on the attack immediately, attempting to link his rival to Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani - a towering figure in Iran since the Revolution who is widely considered to have used his many positions of power over the years to amass vast wealth and influence for himself and his family. (Note: Ahmadinejad defeated Rafsanjani in the second round of the 2005 presidential election and the little-known Ahmadinejad is widely thought to have benefited from a significant anti-Rafsanjani vote.) Throughout the 90-minute debate, Ahmadinejad sought to portray the campaigns of his three rivals as an elaborate plot devised by Rafsanjani and other establishment figures to get rid of him to regain their monopoly of Iran's power and resources. He also tried to pre-empt criticism of the economy - long considered his biggest vulnerability in this race and the object of relentless criticism from his opponents - by blaming earlier governments for Iran's economic woes.

13. (C) In response, Mousavi disparaged virtually every aspect of Ahmadinejad's conduct in office, from his provocative foreign policy to his erratic economic policy decisions, and accused him of leading Iran into "dictatorship." He strongly insinuated that Ahmadinejad suffers from delusions, deriding the President's allegations of kidnapping plots against him during foreign travel. "Should we," Mousavi asked rhetorically, "let our imaginations grow so much that they turn into our foreign policy?" He also mocked the President for threatening to execute the British sailors detained in 2007 then dressing them

up in suits and giving them a send-off worthy of visiting dignitaries, and decried Ahmadinejad's four unanswered letters to Presidents Bush and Obama as an insult to Iran's dignity. Mousavi characterized the President's frequent invocation of the Holocaust as folly that undermined the country's standing.

¶4. (C) These attacks gave Ahmadinejad the opening to trumpet his version of Iran's foreign policy accomplishments during the tenure of his presidency. He countered that releasing the Britons had been a "beautiful act" on behalf of Iran and only followed a written apology from Prime Minister Blair, as well as pledges from the U.K. to change its behavior toward Iran. Ahmadinejad triumphantly noted that after 27 years of trying to bring about regime change in Iran, only after he took over the presidency did the U.S. Government change its policy and want to sit down at a table with Tehran.

¶5. (C) Throughout the debate, Ahmadinejad made good on his public threat last week to "expose" his opponents' and their associates by accusing Rafsanjani and his son of stealing oil money, and former Majles Speaker Nateq-Nuri and his son of living off of bribery. He also attacked the campaign manager of another candidate for corruption during his tenure as mayor of Tehran in the 1990s. Ahmadinejad capped off his naming and shaming by brandishing a photograph of Mousavi's wife, an important political figure in her own right, and accusing her of having circumvented correct university entrance procedures.

Iranians React

¶6. (C) Iranians watching the live debate with IRPO officer gasped audibly at several points during the heated exchange. Our contacts explained that the initial pointed criticism by each candidate of the other was itself a sharp break from the tradition of indirect criticism in political discourse in Iran. Most shocking, however, were Ahmadinejad's allegations of corruption against several pillars of the Islamic Republic. The charges are widely known among Iranians, but had not been previously been leveled in a public forum by a leading government figure.

¶7. (C) Most Iranian media outlets are closed today for the national observance of the twentieth anniversary of Ayatollah Khomeini's death; however bloggers lit up the internet after the debate and scores of videos of post-debate revelry and street confrontations have already been posted on Youtube and elsewhere. In them, raucous crowds are shown pouring into the streets of major urban centers following the debates, with reports of crowds of Ahmadinejad supporters facing off with Mousavi followers. Though no consensus winner has emerged from the debate, Iranians seem largely in awe of the unprecedented political spectacle. In particular, the corruption allegations are the subject of much online chatter. As one Iranian from Isfahan observed on Facebook, "I can't believe what I saw tonight. I hate Ahmadinejad, but he is the only one crazy enough to say all those ugly truths."

¶8. (C) At Imam Khomeini's mausoleum this morning, in an address to mark his death, Supreme Leader Khamenei touched on the upcoming election. Though he did not specifically reference the debate, he said that it is wrong to say that Iran has been humiliated on the world stage, a clear signal to Ahmadinejad's rivals to tone down this line of attack. He also warned candidates' to treat each other with courtesy, and ensure that their disagreements do not spill over into the street. He also reiterated the line from his March 21 Mashhad speech in which he reminded Iranians that he only has one vote and that his vote will remain secret.

Comment

¶9. (C) In this debate, Ahmadinejad made clear that he is trying to run as the anti-establishment candidate, a difficult maneuver for any incumbent to pull off gracefully. Yet among the rural and urban poor who constitute Ahmadinejad's electoral base, the sentiment that the elite have benefited at the expense of

average Iranian is powerful and pervasive. The President's argument hinges on his ability to convince voters that he is the true political heir of the Islamic Revolution, and that the presidents who preceded him - Rafsanjani and Khatami - were aberrations from the original revolutionary goals. Similarly, Ahmadinejad is forcefully ascribing criticism of Iran's economic performance under his watch to the same political actors who are trying to unseat him now, arguing that the problems cited by his critics, namely high inflation and unemployment, have always existed. On the other hand, Mousavi is seeking to portray Ahmadinejad as an unstable, radicalized, destructive deviation from Iran's proper revolutionary course. In many ways, the June 12 election will be a vote on whose version of history wins. There can be little doubt however, that this debate has further polarized voters as the election seems to increasingly be a referendum on Ahmadinejad himself.

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